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FILM

Filmmaker Curt McDowell

He Pulls No Punches With Sex

By Calvin Ahlgren

EQUAL PARTS audacity, candor and humor are incorporated in the films of Curt McDowell, the Indiana-born filmmaker who has made the Bay Area his home for the past 15 years.

Those elements are hallmarks of the craft which McDowell, 36, has employed in a host of short films and features shown all around the U.S. and in Europe. For the movie-going public in general, however, McDowell's films pose something of a problem, in that one of his primary focuses is on human sexuality: the do-it kind, not the talk-about-it kind. Although his first films were mostly humorous and light, his work has gravitated over the years toward an explicitness which some viewers find alarming.

McDowell, who started off at the San Francisco Art Institute on a painter's scholarship (and subsequently took an MFA in film), takes the view that art is a liberating influence. Like a painter, he uses the camera to reveal essences of the culture around him; but film is a medium that gives its subjects more immediacy than does the painter's canvas — especially when the filmmaker does away with Hollywood conventions of character, setting and simulated action.

In his Mission District flat last week, McDowell talked of his work, especially "Loads" (1980, 30 min., black-and-white), the first film he has released in five years. It will have its Bay Area premiere this Thursday at Cinematheque, screening with older McDowell works, and will also be shown in the Roxie Cinema's two-day McDowell program on the 20th and 21st. The filmmaker admitted that his art goes for the genitals, if not the jugular, but also noted that it does so with the most constructive of intentions.

For McDowell, film offers a chance to investigate human desires (chiefly, his own) in a healthy way; his particular metaphor revolves, in the canon of 20th-Century psychoanalysis, around the enigma of his own sexuality and its base in that of his parents.

"In my movies," he said, "almost everybody has multiple roles — which is most interesting to me. If everybody (in the films) can play something of my mother and my father — or Man and Woman — then I can never go wrong." One critic characterized McDowell's approach to carnal doings as one of "Whitmanesque pansexuality."

Proof of his right instincts, he said, comes from viewers. "My films ususally put some people — general audiences — on the spot; make them uncomfortable. But they come up to me one-by-one (sometimes as much as four years later) and tell me it changed their lives." Such an experience was common after release of his 1971 "Confessions" (16 min., B/W), which won three awards (at Ann Arbor, Kent State and St. Xavier College) and has been widely screened.

Curt McDowell's "Loads" and other films will be shown Thursday night at Cinematheque, 800 Chestnut Street, and February 20-21 at the Roxie Cinema, 3117 16th Street.

By Mike Maloney

McDOWELL: 'MY FILMS PUT SOME PEOPLE ON THE SPOT'

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widely screened.

"Confessions" was begun one night when a planned porno-shoot fell through. "The people (actors) didn't make it, so I shut myself up in my room, pointed the camera at the bed, put on this record my mom had made (a mail-order job from Nashville that she had recorded for $75; it was about my parents' courting: 'You Do the Rowing and I'll Do the Crowing'; very romantic, it made me cry). Then I looked at the camera and told my parents all the things I'd done since I was 13 that I never told them about." He later intercut his bedroom revelations with pictorially graphic interviews of friends, and other material, and finished it off with a seguence of him having sex with himself, to a soundtrack of applause.

"I was in *love* with a girl then — such a shock to me — and even got engaged to her. I made the film for her. At the time, I was deciding which way I wanted to go (homo or hetrosexual)." The choice, as shown in "Loads," is pro-male. The film is an anthology of homoerotic trysts with heterosexual men, most of whom could only be aroused before the camera with girlie magazines. "Loads" hits with the power of an elemental dream, as McDowell's intercut flashbacks, alternating moods and textures, and whispered, enigmatic voice-over narrative set the sequences off in an attack-and-retreat, meditative format.

"Loads" follows a similar form to that of his much-applauded "Nudes (A Sketchbook)" (1975, 30 min., B/W), both in its vignette structure and its intensity. " 'Nudes' was a big turning-point for me," he said. "I used to make a whole group of films and show them together at Canyon. I've always felt a bunch of short films could build up the audience. But I thought people would *hate* 'Nudes' 'cause I'd made so many humor films."

It was the hit of the show, however, and "that revealed to me that I was on the right track, secretly, and publicly, on the wrong track. Since then, my films have been mostly dealing with that ... Mostly with my parents' sexuality."

Although he recognizes his own bent as man-directed, McDowell allows himself and the world at large the freedom to experiment. Indeed, in some ways he sees himself, personally and artistically, as a sexual ombudsman. "I think a lot of people could see the world *through* sexuality," he said, "but that's not my purpose ... Somehow the sexual part of my nature has always crept into my films no matter what ... I think there are alternate ways of doing things. The media consider the kind of sex I'm talking about — anything but the missionary position — is taboo. Right now, everyone is dealing (in the world at large) with terrorism and injustice; I'm trying to deal with the injustice of my sex life. I don't think of this desire as wrong or immoral; sex deals with pleasure, and everyone always takes the pleasure out of it in dealing with it.

"All porno films have *something* going for them that I like — even the worst. But they miss the psychological aspect as to why this or that is a turn-on. I have no idea why those straight men (in "Loads") turn me on; I see that it's my own obsession — one of them.

"My real interest lies in things, like, I want to go on expeditions, and always document the sexual aspect of things. Like National Geographic. What do those people (on National Geographic expeditions to out-of-the-way cultures) do with their genitals? Just tuck 'em away and leave 'em there? What did the astronauts do?"

Of his concern with his parents' sexual identities, he said: "I ask myself, 'Why am I predominantly homosexual?' That's what I want to know. It's something that has to come from somewhere, and I'm fascinated by it. It doesn't come from anything I was ever taught, or from my environment — that I'm aware of — but all this time, I've tried to narrow down my fantasies and other people's.

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"Then I have other things (interests) which don't have anything to do with my own genitals. Women are an enigma to me. I don't understand what they want. Most homosexuals don't give a f— what women are thinking; they like women for what they identify with them, but —. I'm not political. My films are celebrations, but I'm not celebrating the gay *lifestyle*. I hate the gay lifestyle ... But since so much of (current norms of) homosexuality is based on guilt and shame, I think you can realize that guilt is what's turning you on ..."

Meanwhile, McDowell is working to complete the load of films which he has shot, but not finished editing, during his five-year retreat from the Big Screen. In terms of approach, he said, "I've decided I want to be able to deal with all different kinds besides (that of) sexuality."

And as for medium, he is just beginning to shoot video — a proximation which has grabbed his interest. "I feel like I'm in the same (relative) era Charlie Chaplin was in, back in Hollywood. ... I think this is it — I feel like I'm in on the ground floor. Visually, I've had ten years of experience, and I'm really just a frustrated rock-and-roller anyway. I make my films like records. I love the format of a record album."

About "Loads" and the potential audience, he added: "In a way I want to, well, not *warn* people, but — eventually people will know whether they want to see my films. There's no reason for me to try to change people who are, oh, 50, or whatever — unless they want to. But I don't want to mislead people who want to see some light, funny films. ..."

RUBBING OUR NOSES IN TABOO

by Ellen Trabilcy

Curt McDowell may be to punk noire film what Alan Watts is to philosophy. Both promulgate taboo behaviors so as to render them acceptable. To express in the media, it seems, is to legitimize, although revolution is slow and visionaries are often hungry in the meanwhile. As Watts put it, Any evolving species must look with misgivings on those of its members who first show signs of change, and will surely regard them as dangerous or crazy.*

"Taboo: The LP and The Single" is McDowell's most recently completed film. I was at its world premiere, a Cinematheque show at the S.F. Art Institute, on October 1. I was paying close attention; I'd seen only a few of McDowell's dozens of other films, all of which are in black-and-white.

After the screening, McDowell was shaking. He quietly told us how he felt about "Taboo" and how nervous he'd been about showing it. He seemed to ease when he talked about it as a "cubistic narrative" -- a story told simultanteously from all perspectives. By the time he announced he'd just been invited to show a mini-retrospective of his work at the Berlin Film Festival next February, he was grinning.

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*All quotations of Watts are from The Book (On the Taboo Against Knowing Who you Are).

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McDowell started shooting "Taboo" five years ago and only recently was able to finance the months of post-production -- most of it in the editing room, as his opening-night pallor attested.

He is an extraordinary editor. His timing is ultrafinely tuned. His eye and ear pick up and translate the same primitive rhythm I've seen in his dancing body, always clad in black or black-and-white. On the coarsest thread of a story he strings pearls of images and sounds that become a hypnotic choker of a film.

The thread of "The LP" portion of "Taboo" was picked up, McDowell tells us on the sound track, in 1972. "I was spending a lot of time hanging around this men's room, [he giggles] at the Maritime Museum," when he came across the first of seven pieces of graffiti that told the story. (See below.) In the next two years, in two locations, McDowell found six more pieces of the story.

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The use of words, says Watts, ...is to point beyond themselves to a world of life and experience that is not mere words or even ideas. (Emphasis mine.) Perhaps this is why the pen and its descendants -- film, the microchip -- are

commonly respected and often revered. The melody of the processed word lingers on, unlike the poetry we all speak, which disappears the moment it appears and can affect only those who witness its brief existence. Work reproduced for dissemination commands attention; good work sustains interest.

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"I kept wondering about who wrote the story," McDowell says, and so he invented a narrator.

A far cry from Nick Carraway, Fahed Martha is a young Palestinian man McDowell got to know on breezy Mission Street evenings. Fahed was 15 when McDowell started filming him in 1977. "His girlfriend Suzie was present at all the shoots," McDowell says. "...To me he represented heterosexual male."

My own vision of Fahed was so different that I failed to see him in that role within the film. What I did see was eager but unripe male sexuality of any age or any sexual persuasion, expressed in the swaggering style typical of swarthy men from hot parts of the world.

While Fahed is displaying his self-made tattoos, for instance, we hear McDowell inquiring about his sexual preferences and practices. McDowell is also heard coaching Fahed's reading of the graffiti. The result of intercutting documentary sequences like these with the theatrics of the story's Fuqua family is a continual shifting of perspective

-- important, says McDowell, "so that you're always aware it's a film."

The family's story is accompanied by a Greek chorus of maxims McDowell took from a book he found in a roadside restaurant in Wyoming, "one of those books that are supposed to brighten the day for old people," he says. The chorus is chanted by one female voice and one male voice (Marion Eaton and one George Kuchar -- together again after "Thundercrack!"), which "peep through the holes of each other so that they get to understand what's happening," McDowell says.

Here are the seven pieces of graffiti (in italics):

Abner L. Fuqua clears his throat and I get mad and stand close to trains or cut my eyebrow off.

George Kuchar as Abner L. Fuqua is a master of menacing nuance. "I made him a tyrant who's into control," says McDowell. "That's one aspect of me." Fahed rotates, hands bound behind him, in a cold shower that actually did turn cold during the shooting. "That's when I got the best footage," the filmmaker says. I shrink the first time a blade is raised to an eyebrow, reminded of Bunuel's surprise.

Dorothy is Abner's wife.

Marion Eaton as Abner's wife Dorothy is a madonna in a black merry widow corset languishing upstairs all day. The Greek chorus chants, "Without a wife, a man lives in a world

without a sound." Downstairs, Abner is watching "The Honeymooners" on tv, "his only stimulation and source of information about what's going on in the world," McDowell says. In the absence of intelligible words, Ralph Kramden is only burlesque and Alice Kramden's deadpan proves that less is more, even though the commercial interruptions tell us more is more, buy and buy. The family, in the kitchen, plays "Let's Furnish A House." Occasionally Dorothy receives a caller in her bed.

Abner can slap hard, like Blue Magic.

Ainslie appears in soft focus as Blue Magic, and the chorus is cut to a clap track with a riveting stop-beat. McDowell and long-time collaborator Mark Ellinger wrote the film's music, which Marion Eaton keeps saying should be released as an album. I agree.

Dorothy rattles pots and pans in the kitchen. I get mad and stand close to trains or cut my eyebrow off.

The chorus: "There is nothing holier in this life of ours than the first consciousness of love -- the first flutterings of its silken wings." Dorothy's sexual encounter over, she descends to the kitchen where the family is playing "Fat Boy's Game." Abner, watching tv in the next room, becomes angry. He clears his throat, and the house shakes. He charges the kitchen and sweeps the playing board off the table. The family scatters. Fahed and his companion play on

the railroad tracks, romp in the park with knives.

Dorothy and Abner are Mary Abner's mother and father.

Melinda McDowell, the filmmaker's sister, plays Mary Abner. She's between daddy's legs when mom whispers something into her ear that stops her cold.

One time, Mary Abner F. kicked the tv set through the wall. Abner L. Fuqua slapped her hard like Blue Magic.

"I didn't want to show her actually kicking a tv set through a wall," McDowell says. The chorus tells us, "Youth is the full spring of life, when joy is stirring in the dancing blood." Abner L. Fuqua descends upon a public toilet and pulls his daughter apart from her act of defiance up against the wall, below the graffiti. Fahed shoots us some beefcake while Suzie and her friend Stephanie dance with 14-year-old abandon.

Abner's face is a yard long from heartbreak and trouble.

This is the only piece of the story that was found in two places. "When I first saw it [at the Maritime Museum], it said only, 'Abner's face is a ya--.' He [?] didn't get to finish it, I guess. So for two years I didn't know the end -- can you imagine? And then I found it again, in the men's room in the park at Bryant and 16th Street, complete. So I felt I was supposed to make this story."

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The constant awareness of death, writes Watts, shows the world to be as flowing and diaphanous as the filmy patterns of blue smoke in the air -- that there is really nothing to clutch and no one to clutch it.

"The Single" portion of "Taboo" is four minutes of footage McDowell shot in 1969 -- part of his first-ever film -- of an autopsy on an unclaimed corpse. "Death is not a foe but an inevitable adventure," chant the Eaton and Kuchar, whose giggles when he flubs the line provide relief from the intensity of the visuals. "A grave is such a quiet place," we hear, and the story ends.

X O X O X O X O X O X O X

The present is the only thing that has no end, Watts quotes the biophysicist Erwin Schrodinger.

"A friend said he's seen other pieces [of the story] around, but I haven't," says McDowell.

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Watts explains that to say that certain events are causally [not "casually"] connected is only a clumsy way of saying that they are features of the same event, like the head and tail of the cat.

During the party following the opening of "Taboo" a few of us go up to the roof to breathe and watch the sky. McDowell is holding his breath as he watches his black-and-white cat Goldie teeter without benefit of tail down a severely sloping portion of the roof when Carmen Vigil, founder of The Cinematheque and long-time supporter of McDowell's art, says the new film reminds him of Maya Deren's work. McDowell demurs immediately. Goldie skids upright to the bottom of the slope.

McDowell contemplates the tar and sighs. "I just wish I knew what this film means," he says, yet again.

Wonder, says Watts, and its expression in poetry and the arts, are among the most important things which seem to distinguish [humans] from other animals, and intelligent and sensitive people from morons.

"Taboo" is scheduled to play at the Roxie Theatre on December 11 and 12 (the full moon and the night after).